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An Experiment in Progressive Government

The Czechoslovak Republic

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IN the Declaration of Independence of the Czechoslovak Republic by its then provisional government, issued on October 18, 1918, we find the following statements:

Our democracy shall rest on universal suffrage. Women shall be placed on equal footing with men politically, socially and culturally. The rights of the minority shall be safeguarded by proportional representation; national minorities shall enjoy equal rights. The government shall be parliamentary in form and shall recognize the principles of the initiative and referendum. The standing army will be replaced by militia. . . . The Czechoslovak Nation will carry out far-reaching social and economic reforms; the large estates will be redeemed for home colonization; patents of nobility will be abolished. . . . Our nation will assume its part of the Austro-Hungarian pre-war public debt; the debts for this war we leave to those who incurred them. . . . In its foreign policy the Czechoslovak Nation will accept its full share of responsibility in the reorganization of eastern Europe. It accepts fully the democratic and social principle of nationalism and subscribes to the doctrine that all covenants and treaties shall be entered into openly and frankly without secret diplomacy. . . . Our constitution shall provide an efficient, rational and just government, which will exclude all special privileges and prohibit class legislation.

This quotation is in itself a program, and at the same time it succinctly states the problems and tasks with which the new Czechoslovak Republic is confronted. These problems are not dissimilar to those found in the other new states formed as a result of the defeat of the Central Empires: Poland and Jugo-Slavia, as well as in united Rumania. In approaching these questions the American public must remember that the situation in Europe differs fundamentally from that prevailing in America. One can defend very plausibly the individualistic school of political economy, and equally so—if not with even more plausibility—what may properly be called the coöperative school of thought. But the most beautiful theories frequently collide with hard facts, and it is hard facts with which European statesmen must deal. They must satisfy, first of all, the demand of their peoples for

decent livelihood. It is only too obvious that to permit matters to drift as the extreme individualist so frequently demands would be worse than suicidal. When we think of the density of population in western and mid-Europe, and the comparative sparsity of population in the United States, we realize in a moment how fundamentally the situation differs, and how fundamentally different the approach to solution of social questions and problems of social reform inevitably must be.

An indication of how thoroughly democratic the new Republic is, is found in the fact that one of the very first acts of the National Assembly was the abolition of all patents of nobility. Thus the new nation, through its duly authorized representatives, with one stroke gave earnest of its intention to do away with everything savoring of medievalism.

THE LAND QUESTION

Of the economic and social problems one of the most important confronting the new state was that of the large landed estates. You will remember that hesitation to deal with this question was perhaps the fundamental reason why the Russian provisional government was wrecked, and why bolshevism gained the upper hand. Czechoslovak statesmen do not propose to be caught unawares in this fashion. The estates in most cases are those held by alien nobility and the late imperial house. More often than not they came into the hands of these various clans during the carpet-bagging period of the Thirty Years War, when Bohemia was plundered right and left by the Hapsburgs and their retainers. On April 16th the National Assembly adopted a law expropriating all large estates exceeding 150 hectares¹ of land under cultivation, or that can be cultivated, and 100 hectares of woodland. Under this law the state will take over 1,300,000 hectares of cultivated land, and 3,000,000 hectares of woodland, which will furnish livelihood to 430,000 families. In the case of estates of the imperial family, estates illegally acquired, and estates of persons who during the war had been guilty of treason against the Czechoslovak nation, no compensation will be paid. There will be compensation to all those who have not legally forfeited their right to it, or whose possession was not based upon robbery, theft or fraud.

¹ A hectare is a measure of area containing ten thousand square metres, or 2.471 acres.

THE LABOR QUESTION

Immediately following the abolition of all patents of nobility and the making private citizens of various princes, dukes and counts, the National Assembly passed a law establishing the eight-hour day. According to latest advices, the National Assembly is about to pass legislation aimed at doing away with unemployment and, in so far as this may not be possible, to alleviate the condition of the unemployed. No doubt ultimately this legislation will include some sort of a scheme of insurance against unemployment, against sickness and accident, and similar features of what is known in Europe as social legislation. The establishment of workingmen's chambers is being contemplated. This should not be confused with soviet institutions. In Europe chambers of commerce and similar institutions have a legal status, and logically, if there can be chambers of commerce, there is no reason why there should not be workingmen's chambers, which will be the legally authorized representatives and spokesmen of the workingmen, even as the chambers of commerce speak for the manufacturer and the merchant. In the meantime, the government is undertaking emergency public works to reduce the number of unemployed and it has appropriated millions of crowns for these works, particularly in the City of Prague.

Radical as certain features of this legislation may appear to some Americans, considering European standards and the advanced standing of the labor movement in particular, as well as its tremendous influence, it is simply what the times call for, if violent upheavals are to be avoided. After all, we must remember that the laws of social development were not suspended on the day we were born, and that history is also a record of transition from one order to another. The problem for the statesman and the sound thinker is to seek an orderly way, one which can be pursued with the minimum of suffering to society as a whole, and to the individuals composing it. The art of real statesmanship may be said to consist in bringing about new social formations without violence and without bloodshed. This, so far, the Czechoslovak Republic has accomplished. It seems to have taken a leaf out of the book of Anglo-Saxon history, as exemplified both in Great Britain and the United States, the most marked feature of which is the fact that in most cases fundamental changes in government and society were accomplished peacefully.

Certainly the methods adopted by the Czechoslovaks are diametrically opposed to bolshevism. The latter, if it has come to stand for anything, means revolutionary changes by violence, by civil war. It stands for the dictatorship of the proletariat, and for the soviet system of government. There is not a trace of that in the measures I have enumerated. On the contrary, everything is being done in an orderly and legal way; by the parliamentary methods so well known to western democracies and to the United States.

THE ARMY

Czechoslovak statesmen will be careful to prevent anything resembling militarism from striking roots in the Republic. The Czechoslovak army still standing in Siberia is very democratic, as is inevitable from its origin, having been organized voluntarily by the men themselves for the purpose of fighting for the independence of their native land, and against German, Magyar and Prussian militarism. President Masaryk himself is squarely opposed to militarism which means rule by an army clique, and the subordination of civic ideals to those of the military martinet. In a recent public speech in Prague, the President declared that the new nation must have a democratic army based upon free and voluntary discipline and convinced of its mission to defend the country against external enemies. This democratic army will be solely for purposes of defense. Naturally it will be governed by the exigencies of the international situation, and by the fact whether or not an international organization can be achieved which will do away entirely with the necessity of any armies except for purely police purposes.

WOMAN SUFFRAGE

Woman suffrage is already an accomplished fact in the Republic. Even now eight members of the National Assembly are women, among them Dr. Alice Masaryk, daughter of the president, well known in America. During the war, she was held by the Austrian authorities in jail for a period of nine months.

PRESIDENTIAL POWERS

Under European constitutional practice the power of the president is usually meagre indeed. It seems likely, however,

that the Czechoslovak state will somewhat follow American examples. Thus, in accordance with a recent recommendation of the Constitutional Committee of the National Assembly, the president shall have the right to name and dismiss cabinet ministers, negotiate and ratify international agreements and treaties; shall be present and preside at the meetings of the Council of Ministers, having also the right to make recommendations to the National Assembly in matters of state. This does not mean that parliamentary control will be done away with, and that the president will have anything like autocratic powers. But it does mean that he is to possess a larger freedom of movement and more initiative than a European president usually has.

GERMAN POPULATION

In mid-Europe no state can be created without certain national minorities, and this is a troublesome problem indeed. There is going to be in the Czechoslovak Republic a minority of Germans, not nearly so large as the Germans themselves claim, but still a minority. This fact entitles us to all the sympathy the world can give us, especially when we bear in mind that this is a German minority. This minority is entitled to fair treatment. The Czechoslovak delegation at the Peace Conference, in outlining our claims, declared that the New republic will guarantee to national minorities full freedom of development and cultivation of racial individuality. Dr. Charles Kramar, the Prime Minister of the Czechoslovak Republic, in a speech delivered to the National Assembly in Prague on December 20th, 1918, said that complete cultural, social and economic freedom will be granted to Bohemian Germans. Dr. Kramar said:

We do not want to be oppressors. We do not want to follow the former German policy in Austria, as we have seen what it leads to. The Germans in Bohemia, with their great economic strength, are shrewd enough calculators not to have any particular desire to be incorporated into Germany. For the Czechoslovak Republic the whole world is open. Germany, on the contrary, will be in the worse imaginable position. Even if there were no direct economic boycott, the indirect moral boycott will be far more terrible.

The Czech Social Democrats of Bohemia are certainly not jingoes, and their chief organ, the *Pravo Lidu*, on December 7, 1918, in writing on the question of the German minority, said:

The present German possession in Bohemia is not the result of natural development, but of terror and oppression. In the natural development and a free course, the German possessions in the north of Bohemia would assume quite another aspect. In spite of the terror and oppression and so-called assimilation, we can prove that German Bohemia does not exist, as this territory is everywhere mixed with the Czech population, which in many places forms, as a matter of fact, majorities. According to reliable estimates, there were in 1910 in the district of Most, in northern Bohemia, which the Germans claim, over 40,000 Czechs; in Litvinow, over 30,000; in Duchov, over 35,000; in Bilinia, about 30,000; in Teplice over 20,000, etc. Since 1910 the development was in favor of the Czechs, so that it may be safely assumed that in many places the Czech minorities have now become majorities.

As regards the attitude of the Germans in Bohemia themselves, it is interesting to quote the German paper *Prager Tagblatt* of December 23, 1918:

Masaryk claims the integrity of Bohemia, but he wants to assure the German minorities not only equal rights, but also full rights of nationalities. This is a new idea. If a really democratic autonomy is introduced, we shall have no reason to complain.

THE NATIONAL POLICY

In any event, because the Germans and Magyars oppressed the Czechoslovaks, it does not follow that the latter will oppress the former. It is a significant fact that during the whole of the nineteenth century not a single Czech statesman appeared who in any way advocated the oppression of other peoples. On the contrary the Czechs always emphasized the fact that they would accord their German citizens complete civil rights which, of course, includes cultural rights. It was the great Czech historian and statesman, Palacky, who said that we never had, nor ever shall have the intention of oppressing other people; that, true to our character, rejecting all desire for the revenge of past wrongs, we extend our right hand to all our neighbors who are prepared to recognize the equality of all nations without regard to their size or political power. And it was Havlicek, the Czech leader in 1848, who said that oppression never brings good results, and in time brings vengeance upon the heads of its own originators.

The new Czechoslovak Republic is the greatest experiment in really liberal and progressive government ever undertaken on the European Continent, and it is entitled to the sympathy and aid of the great American democracy.